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For Immediate Release

May 20, 2009

## **Auto Thefts Down Dramatically in Texas**

Praise the work of auto theft task forces or new car manufacturers or both for the dramatic drop in auto thefts in Texas. Criminals are stealing older vehicles simply because they're finding it harder to bypass anti-theft devices that manufacturers have placed in newer cars.

In some areas of the state auto thefts have dropped more than 80 percent in the past 15 years. Nationwide, auto thefts have dropped every year since 2003.

"Auto manufacturers continue to implement new anti-theft features making it much more difficult to steal a new car," said Lt. Tommy Hansen, past president of the International Association of Auto Theft Investigators. "But, even if with all of the new anti-theft devices in place, almost 50 percent of vehicles that are stolen still had the keys in the ignition."

Hansen said while auto thefts might be down, auto burglaries are skyrocketing. "When drivers leave their GPS units and laptop computers in plain sight, they are just asking for their vehicle to be burglarized," said Hansen.

Hansen said auto theft is a business and that older vehicles become marketable on the black market because of the need for certain auto parts. He said just because one drives an older car, it's not any less prone to being stolen.

Eight of the top ten most stolen cars are vehicles that are at least ten years old, according to the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB). The top three most stolen vehicles are a 1995 Honda Civic, a 1991 Honda Accord and a 1989 Toyota Camry.

"Unfortunately, most owners of older cars have abandoned their comprehensive auto insurance coverage and are only paying for state mandated liability coverage," says Mark Hanna, a spokesman for the Insurance Council of Texas. "This leaves them without any insurance protection if their vehicle is stolen, but there are several anti-theft devices on the market that can help them secure their vehicle."

Financially, auto theft remains a serious problem in Texas. In 2007, thieves made off with 94,000 vehicles worth \$859 million.

Statewide in Texas, auto thefts are down 58 percent since the state implemented the Texas Auto Burglary and Theft Prevention Authority (ABTPA) in 1991. However, the Mexican border remains a problem where auto thefts have skyrocketed. Laredo is ranked second in the nation in number of vehicle thefts per 100,000 inhabitants.

Sgt. Eduardo Garcia of the Laredo Auto Theft Task Force says the problem with auto thefts along the Mexican border is completely different from anywhere else. “The criminals here can steal a vehicle and have it across the border in Mexico within three minutes,” said Garcia. “They have also learned to bypass the anti-theft systems. All they need is a screw driver and a pair of vice grips.”

Garcia said the most stolen vehicles in Laredo are Dodge, Ford and Chevrolet trucks which are used to carry or smuggle people and contraband. He said 90 percent of the vehicles stolen in Laredo are taken into Mexico and the officers’ jurisdiction stops at the border.

If thieves are having a hard time stealing a certain vehicle, Garcia said they will take that car into Mexico and dissect it and eventually find a way to be able to steal this vehicle. Garcia called it Auto Theft 101.

Law enforcement officials say a wealth of information is readily available to professional auto thieves who have been able to bypass about every anti-theft device that manufacturers have put into place. The pros either strip the vehicle for parts or change the identification of the vehicle with a title from another car and then sell it.

Tow trucks have also been used to steal vehicles and this bypasses any anti-theft devices put in place.

In an attempt to prevent auto thefts and auto burglaries the Insurance Council of Texas has worked with more than a dozen Texas cities in providing **Lock, Take and Hide** crime prevention signs for the parking areas of shopping malls, restaurants, business centers and apartment complexes. The signs advise motorists to Lock their cars, Take their keys and Hide their possessions.

“Criminals would have a much harder time in stealing and burglarizing vehicles if all motorists heeded this simple message,” said Hanna.

The ABTPA says other preventive measures that have slowed down auto thefts have been etching VIN numbers into vehicle windshields, educating communities on how they can prevent auto thefts and having dedicated law enforcements focused on auto theft.

The Insurance Council of Texas is the largest state insurance trade association in the country consisting of approximately 500 property and casualty insurers writing business in Texas. For more information turn to ICT’s Web site at [www.insurancecouncil.org](http://www.insurancecouncil.org).

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